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Becoming a good host: A beginner's guide to learning deliberative civic engagement

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Every day I ask myself who I am and how I can become my best self. My name is Kevin L.D. Leaven; I am an African-American advocate for human rights and a student of communication studies researching public diplomacy and community organization. My passion involves inspiring others to engage with people and ideas through dialogue to foster mutual understanding and cultivate mutually-beneficial relationships. I grew up on Victory Boulevard in Portsmouth, Virginia surrounded by food deserts, fried chicken, and strip malls in a city labeled a ghetto. While others used broad generalizations and labels to dismiss my neighborhood, there was considerable richness and diversity. This cultural diversity encouraged me to build relationships with friends from a variety of cultural backgrounds; Ethiopian, Kazakh-Russian, Jamaican-British, South-African, Saudi, and Kosovar and these relationships coupled with the opportunities I've had to travel and experience diverse cultures have taught me that developing meaningful connections with other people requires vulnerability, honesty, and solidarity.

Applying these lessons has helped me in my role as a graduate student, teaching an introductory speech course. I've designed my class to prioritize fostering fruitful classroom discussions about controversial topics because I believe that cultivating a positive teaching environment requires constructive dialogue. Through previous graduate seminars and professional workshops, I've researched helpful methodologies for peacebuilding, and I believe that Deliberative Civic Engagement (DCE) provides a powerful framework to bring groups together to "engage in constructive, informed and decisive dialogue about important issues" (Nabatchi et al., 2013, p. 1). These processes are applied across numerous contexts aiming to foster a sense of community by cultivating empathetic listening amongst individuals. Within the discipline of intercultural communication, DCE is used to invite diverse groups of participants

together into a shared space to engage in democratically inspired dialogue. In these spaces, every participant has an equal opportunity to contribute their ideas, opinions and thoughts. Through the exchange of lived experiences and cultural traditions, dialogue creates the space to acknowledge the factors influencing the behaviors and attitudes of others. DCE provides a helpful approach for work in the field of peacebuilding as the processes encourage critical self-reflection while nourishing the conditions needed to build connections among diverse groups. To illuminate the value of Deliberative Civic Engagement in peacebuilding contexts, this article will explain DCE from a communication studies standpoint, explore the essential components of the framework, and review several case studies in which DCE is already played a role in peacebuilding. My hope is that, through this primer on DCE, others will feel empowered to enact some of these principles when they find themselves in situations that call for constructive dialogue.

What is DCE?

According to Nabatchi et al. (2013), DCE “denotes processes that enable citizens, civic leaders, and government officials to come together in public spaces where they can engage in constructive informed and decisive dialogue about important issues” (p. 7). Consequently the primary goal of DCE seeks to enhance social connections between individuals by using dialogue as a tool for peacebuilding.

DCE research hails from an wide range of academic fields including political science, public administration, public policy, anthropology, communication, sociology, conflict resolution, law, urban planning, and environmental science (Nabatchi et al., 2013). The array of disciplines contributing to the foundation of DCE is unsurprising, considering the virtually infinite forms of conflict impacting the health of social relationships.

This paper approaches DCE from a communication studies-based social constructivist standpoint. This perspective views meaning as *actively negotiated* and *contested* via social constructions (Hogan et al., 2018). In other words, people make sense of reality through narratives which help organize the world using language to articulate abstract concepts. Moreover, communication studies purports that language is comprised of symbols that signify connotative and denotative meanings; as a result, meaning is ascribed through our contextual and cultural experiences (Maoz & Ellis, 2006). Dynamic systems of meaning comprise our networks of ideology, identity, and shared history, which constitute collective cultural narratives when combined. The manifestations of these cultural narratives ground the arguments, relationships, and understandings influencing power relations between groups. Thus, exchanges between antagonistic groups benefit from establishing a shared connections to bring people together. Unpacking shared feelings and beliefs between hostile groups lays the foundation to mutual understanding of the complex systems undergirding group identities (Maoz & Ellis, 2006). A significant premise respected among communication theorists is that there is not a normative "correct" ideology that is objectively identifiable (Hauser & Benoit-Barne, 2002). Instead, communities must work together to construct a broad understanding of the social reality they inhabit using dialogue to enhance cooperation and cope with misunderstanding.

Communication enables groups to address problems and process information together using various lenses of lived experience and cultural knowledge. Deliberation involves “creating a shared information base, clarifying values, identifying options, weighing the pros and cons of possible solutions, and making decisions” (Black, 2012, p. 8). Within the broader Communication discipline, DCE concerns facilitating “public participation efforts that engage citizens in deliberative conversation with one another, often in the hope of informing public

practice” (Black, 2012, p. 7). Decisions made on an individual or national level require deliberation to evaluate consequences implicated by the behaviors and actions of individuals (Hauser & Benoit-Barne, 2002). Different communities and cultures adopt different values and beliefs which are negotiated through communication. DCE encourages communal cohesion by enabling groups to think holistically as a collective with shared values and interests (Maoz & Ellis, 2006). Collaboration among differing groups demands that DCE events are open enough to be influenced by the immediate concerns of the participants involved. DCE also fosters a sense of vulnerability in order to support deep thinking and connection among participants with diverse cultural identities.

Communication theorists view humans as social animals with the capability to employ complex cognitive functions (i.e., reason). That said, DCE focuses on fostering emotional and intellectual engagement amongst participants (Hauser & Benoit-Barne, 2002). According to Taylor and Kent (2014), “engagement is a part of dialogue and through engagement, organizations and publics can make decisions that create social capital” (p. 384). Social capital is built upon intangible assets like trust, respect and admiration which affect the quality of relationships.

Intercultural communication scholars like Broome (2006) and Maoz & Ellis (2006) regard DCE as a process used to reduce *communal tension* by generating collaborative solutions to societal issues. This communal tension is a natural, expected part of the process of addressing competing values and interests among disparate groups (Maoz & Ellis, 2006). When communal tension manifests it can be channeled for constructive or destructive purposes and DCE works to cultivate peaceful constructive engagement between parties especially regarding interethnic, interracial, and interfaith conflicts. Consequently, intercultural communication scholars privilege

the role of communication in efforts to mitigate conflict peacefully by emphasizing dialogue as a critical tool in conflict resolution and reconciliation efforts. Culturally-sensitive group facilitation methods like DCE can provide prudent means for addressing deep-rooted conflicts (Broome, 2006).

Essential Components of DCE

With this understanding of what DCE aims to achieve, what follows are the building blocks for successful dialogue. Beneficial, intentional DCE protocols prioritize the following criteria: an impartial moderator to oversee discussion among participants, an agenda with outlined goals for the program, volunteer representatives of affected communities, a designated venue chosen to foster inclusivity among all parties involved, and an emphasis on how communication is being utilized to express complicated feelings (Svensson & Brounéus, 2013). For example, this past fall I co-led a discussion on political engagement in college classrooms between students and faculty at my university. Our event addressed how American political polarization affected the classroom learning environment. The goal sought to bring faculty and students together to discuss the factors impacting political and social engagement with content in class.

The event was held in a popular public meeting space on campus that was familiar to both students and faculty, in a centralized location accessible to both parties involved. At the beginning of the discussion I invited the participants to gather in a large circle and to reflect on their expectations for their time shared together. I then asked participants to express their preferences for group agreements which served as a communal contract to foster a sense of trust and cooperation. As a facilitator I sought to cultivate an positive atmosphere primed for critical engagement. The discussion was meant to foster diversity of ideas in a respectful and loving way

and the resulting feedback affirmed our success cultivating a community amidst acquaintances discussing emotionally polarizing topics.

For the process of DCE to have an impact, the following qualities are required: empathetic listening, perspective-taking, and culturally appropriate facilitation methods (Broome, 2006). During the political engagement in college classrooms dialogue between students and faculty, there was a broad range of participant ages, races, classes, cultures and genders represented in the room. I asked participants to reflect on their experiences on campus and encouraged individuals to share their thoughts and feelings with the group. After a period of silent reflection, individuals began to speak up one after the other filling the room with an animated discussion. Once the conversation began the participants drove the discussion and my role shifted to a conversational guide. Thankfully this event was very smooth, the participants were vulnerable with one another and the discussion was constructive.

Intercultural communication theorists recognize that a universal approach to facilitation and engagement is nonexistent. Instead, practitioners must adapt their programs to specific local contexts. Situating an issue in a broad framework of economic, social, and historical contexts allows for rich, holistic conceptualizations of complex issues. Appreciating the complexity of issues as understood by oppositional groups is necessary for constructive DCE to occur.

DCE Challenges and Strategies for Success

Despite the benefits of approaching DCE from a communicative framework, recognizing limitations within the theoretical framework serves as an essential grounding mechanism. First, some cultures may be prone to avoiding confrontation to abide by cultural-specific norms (Black, 2012). In this case, emphasizing the inclusivity of the space and explaining the methodology might not be sufficient to encourage full participation. Second, besides cultural propensities,

participation must be voluntary to manifest the type of engagement and results desired. Groups cannot and should not be coerced into a setting to incite change even if the intention is perceived as good. Communities must have an internal locus of control, encouraging and supporting the agenda of DCE events. Third, DCE events are time-consuming processes that often require extensive programs that take multiple one-hour sessions over the course of many weeks. Building trust and familiarity between participants requires extended exposure to oppositional groups, and deep-rooted beliefs are not easily discarded, nor should they be. Dialogue situates an issue within a multilayered context to enable meaningful discussion to develop viable solutions for growth. Naturally then, issues cannot be brushed aside or dismissed quickly. Fourth, Svensson and Brounéus (2013) note, “while dialogue can be positive for trust it may also increase possible tensions from the perspective of ethnic-group relationships” (p. 564). In my experience, this tension has risen in interracial discussions looking at structural inequality across society. For example, during the discussion on political engagement during the fall there was a certain anxiety around addressing deep-seated racial issues woven into societal structures. However, tension is a natural response in uncomfortable situations and the discussions probed into the realm of discomfort to push participants to grow alongside one another. This acknowledgement, supported by group affirmations, helped reduce ambiguity thereby easing group tension throughout the event. Acknowledging this potential is critical for the success of DCE events. Finally, programs designed to implement DCE processes work best in smaller scales, and thus national initiatives are difficult to carry out due to a combination of complicating factors aforementioned and otherwise (Svensson & Brounéus, 2013). These are the most common drawbacks named in DCE communication studies literature. However, despite these limitations, communication theorists have applied these public engagement processes effectively

in numerous areas of public contention, including peacebuilding efforts, which is discussed in the next section of this article.

DCE in Peacebuilding Contexts

Peacebuilding is a process that engages in reflexive and adaptive methods of deliberation to achieve reconciliatory goals. In other words, DCE pushes participants to examine their own feelings, reactions, and motives in the company of others. Conflict rooted in ethnic, racial, or religious tension tears at the fabric of society, often leaving division and social discord in the wake of relational and physical destruction. Whether sparked by identity issues or disputes over resources, conflict begets resentment and anguish, which undermines social cohesion.

Addressing deep-seated tension between factions requires parties from within both oppositional groups to demonstrate an interest in mending bonds with the other. Yielding to democratic processes of constructive dialogue requires courage and patience from participants. Dialectical processes within the peacebuilding domain usually involve conflict-dyads, two factions within a society rife with animosity towards each other. Peacebuilding efforts in Cyprus, Israel/Palestine, and Ethiopia are examples of public engagement processes aimed to reduce societal tension by fostering a shared understanding of perspective.

In the following paragraphs, I will be drawing upon scholars' observations of DCE peacebuilding efforts in three distinct scenarios and identifying the common practices and patterns that emerged amongst all of these. Communities engaged in community-building DCE programs typically feel a sense of anxiety stemming from previous conflict. In general, there is the sense that "both sides feel victims of aggression, and neither side trusts the other" (Broome, 2006, p. 127). But within these factions, after long periods of conflict, members of oppositional groups decided that they needed to take the initiative to understand the other side better.

Individuals established several coalitions with peacebuilding missions (Maoz & Ellis, p. 188). Despite some hesitation from group members, these factions formed on the basis of DCE principles allowing impartial third parties to facilitate discussions among the disputing groups. Participation in these DCE events signifies the participants' discontent with the anguish and anxiety experienced within a torn community. The dialogues were structured by identifying the meaningful concepts, feelings, and events that should be addressed. Meetings were convened in neutral zones, in or outside of the country, using a common language between groups to engage in direct dialogue.

Due to the significant amount of content to be discussed, deliberation spanned between two and five hours per session with total elapsed time ranging from two days to nine months — the goals of these sessions concerned increasing tolerance, trust, and empathy from participants. Through the use of story exchanges, trust games, and round-robin style discussions, many participants across the case studies were able to interact with their communal rivals in a novel way, *as human beings*. Consistent across the literature, there is recognition of a dehumanizing effect that results from extremist identity constructions in the wake of conflict. Prolonged exposure to simplistic narratives of oppositional groups can be challenged during DCE events. Once groups begin engaging with one another empathetically, there is increased possibility for collaboration and mutual understanding.

Challenging assumptions about the issues being faced by both groups creates opportunities for novel perspective-building. Collaborating to design realistic, context-driven community goals after trust has been established helped to inform policy proposals. Over time, recognition of societal shifts in attitude towards formerly demonized groups has significant positive consequences on societal cohesion. Racial relations between black and white groups in

the US is one example of a dynamic that could be significantly improved upon by utilizing dialogic exchanges to support reconciliatory peacebuilding initiatives (Taylor & Kent, 2014). The cases examined here all experienced positive results fostering better relations amongst the participants signaling that there is hope for reconciliation and an array of techniques to utilize.

DCE in the area of peacebuilding is necessary because post-conflict societies yearn for non-violent means of addressing deep-seated issues (Broome, 2006). Societal shifts in perception of oppositional groups require a commitment to using peaceful means of reconciliation and an appreciation of diverse values and perspectives. Changing attitudes and perceptions of oppositional groups requires significant time and emotional commitments from participants. However, the emotional and time costs are far outweighed by the prospective economic and social benefits that come from peacebuilding activities (Svensson & Brounéus, 2013).

Processes utilizing dialogue to address societal tension are instrumental in recognizing democratically-inspired ideals in governance. As globalization continues to encourage people from different cultures to relocate for opportunities around the world, these processes are needed to reduce stress precipitated by varied racial, ethnic, religious, and ideological intersections in democratic societies. Encouraging peaceful engagement using DCE invites individuals to engage in a discussion facilitated in a democratic manner (Musso et al., 2011). Moreover, by encouraging diverse members of communities to reconcile their preconceived notions about other groups in their presence will be instrumental to social cohesion. Confronting demonized caricatures of groups with human representatives in DCE events has the potential to inspire empathy. Instead of negative, stereotypical “othering” (e.g, those people are crazy, murderers, liars, etc.), DCE enables participants to build trust and feelings of community amongst participants. It is powerful - for public relations on a small scale and international diplomatic

relations at large - to recognize that there are individuals similar to oneself who are willing to meet each other to discuss progressive, non-discriminatory strategies for change. Moving the principles of intercultural communication theory into reflexive praxis enables peacebuilding work to support social structures.

Conclusion

Bringing together representatives from oppositional groups has the potential to reinforce longstanding divisions and harden mindsets. An intentional process based on listening and sharing stories of vulnerability holds potential for a unique type of engagement focused on addressing shared issues. By focusing on fostering dialogic engagement, the act of listening and sharing vulnerable stories becomes transformative in and of itself. The benefits of the cognitive models created within DCE are that they help the facilitator create spaces conducive to rich conversations among disparate groups. There are various ways principles from DCE can be applied in daily life to help mitigate the uncertainty that accompanies trying to run an event, meeting, or gathering where there is at least the potential for dissent.

It is empowering to recognize that a dialogue facilitator's role is simply to "spin the wheel" or to redirect the participants' energy by acting as a conduit for constructive conversation. As a facilitator, one's goal concerns welcoming others into a space in which everyone feels familiar with one another. The goal is *not* to act as though the participants are going to become the best of friends. Rather the facilitator acts as a good host and helps reduce the social friction among the individuals gathered together. While there is not a "one size fits all" DCE strategy that can be applied under all circumstances, the application of the principals that emerge from DCE literature can yield tremendous benefits for all of us – on both individual and societal levels of communication and relationship-building.

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